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Lean, green home machine

New prototypes are more efficient, kinder to the environment - and do plenty of techy tasks for their owners.

By Alan J. Heavens

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Strong, green, efficient, and digital.

Few of today's houses can boast all those attributes. But there's a growing movement in the residential building industry to ensure that the next generation of houses will be all that and more.

And for the last five years at the International Builders Show, as well as at the annual Consumer Electronics Show, the NextGen Home Experience, produced by iShow.com of Bellevue, Wash., has risen to the challenge.

Sprouting from seemingly endless blacktop behind the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, Fla., NextGen's "First to the Future" house for 2007 was just one of a neighborhood of "concept" houses created for the builders show. Yet it's the house that consistently attracts the most attention, and typically has the longest lines - though observers say it's become less conceptual and more digital.

"When it started, they were looking for more concepts," says Colin Theilmann, product manager for Delta Faucet, who was involved in the first NextGen house at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas in 2003.

"This year, most of the products featured in the NextGen house are already available on the market," says Theilmann, who oversaw Delta's entry, a retractable-faucet mechanism in its Brizo line that is still more concept than actual product.

NextGen's growing focus on digital technology reflects modern-day reality. It showcased, for example, Life/Ware software by Exceptional Innovation, which lets you control entertainment and home-automation functions throughout the house, and from remote locations.

Life/Ware is a critical piece of the ConnectedLife.Home package that Best Buy for Business is retailing for \$15,000. It includes an Insteon lighting-control system, an RCS thermostat, Panasonic cameras, HP's z560 Media Center, an Xbox 360, and lots of networking products and accessories.

This NextGen house was a two-story affair for the first time, says iShow.com spokeswoman Deanne Baker. The first floor was a fully furnished, how-people-live model. The second floor, with the master bedroom, offered a look at the "hidden assets" of the house - how it was built, including framing and insulation.

Outdoors and indoors, the emphasis was on sleek and stylish, as demonstrated in the appliances, fixtures, cabinetry and furnishings.

Armstrong's contribution of cherry and maple cabinetry from its LaCerise and Sedona lines throughout the house emphasized the Lancaster company's "focus on design," says spokeswoman Michelle J. Zelman.

Italian appliance manufacturer Ariston's built-in coffeemaker, which debuted at April's Kitchen and Bath Show in Chicago at \$2,500, had its place in the NextGen kitchen, near the TMIO Connectio Intelligent Oven. The latter, also a showhouse veteran, appeared with a new 30-inch profile (\$7,495).

Rinnai, best known for its gas on-demand water heaters, provided a RHFE 750 ETR direct-vent, 83 percent efficient fireplace (\$3,800).

The home's tankless heater, a whole-house electric version, was a Seisco by Microtherm (\$750).



The family room of the NextGen home. Software lets you control entertainment and home-automation functions throughout the house, and from remote locations.

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These days, it seems that outdoor living is a component of every showhouse. Wood Stone, which has been producing residential ovens for a few years, decided that this particular house was an excellent showcase for its Bistro Home 3030 (\$10,500) "instead of word of mouth or through restaurateurs," says spokeswoman Tamra Nelson.

High style and high tech are an eye-catching combination. But people are interested in paint colors, too - with "green" being the operative color. So all the paintable walls of the NextGen house were covered in Sherwin-Williams' Harmony interior latex because of its environment-friendly qualities, says spokeswoman Emily Rasmusson: antimicrobial properties to resist mildew, no volatile organic compounds, and a "low-odor coating that allows immediate occupancy for newly painted spaces."

Harmony, which is available in 1,000 hues - Pacer White, Virtual Taupe, Basket Beige and Flower Pot were the NextGen color choices - costs about \$35 a gallon and has been available in stores for almost two years.

Up on the second floor, Carrier Corp. showed off its Infinity Hybrid Heat System, which combines a gas furnace and an electric heat pump. Depending on the temperature outside, the system switches from one fuel source to the other to achieve optimum efficiency and reduce costs. (Price depends on the size of the house to be heated, among other factors.)

Icynene's foam insulation filled the exposed roof joists and wall studs in one second-floor room, providing air sealing and insulation, as well as preventing moisture intrusion - which covered NextGen's efficiency, green and strong categories.

Strength also meant hurricane resistance, though DuPont's StormRoom with Kevlar, designed to withstand winds of 250 m.p.h., was barely distinguishable from the typical walk-in closet.

Just in case you thought everything in the NextGen house was designed with humans in mind, consider that it came equipped with another Kitchen and Bath Show veteran, the JentlePet spa for dogs (\$1,199 to \$2,500, depending on bells and whistles).

The JentlePet, made by MTI Whirlpools, was situated in the utility room, while other MTI products could be found in the guest and master baths.


But no dogs were bathed during the run of this concept house. For all its many features, NextGen didn't have a lot of running water.

"We just had a recirculating pump, to demonstrate one faucet," Baker says.

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